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Robert Leinheiser

Vassar College, roleinheiser@vassar.edu

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VASSAR COLLEGE

Directing Violence from “Stage to Page”

Revenge Tragedies and the Early Modern
Dramatic Form

By Rob Leinheiser

Advised by Zoltán Márkus, PhD.

Vassar College English Department — Fall 2015

<p><i>Ham.</i> Come on sir.</p> <p><i>They catch one anothers Rapiers, and both are wounded, Leartes falles downe, the Queene falles downe and dies.</i></p> <p><i>King</i> Looke to the Queene.</p> <p><i>Queene</i> O the drinke, the drinke, <i>Hamlet</i>, the drinke. (Quarto 1 1603, I3^V)</p>	<p><i>Laer.</i> Haue at you now</p> <p><i>In scuffling they change Rapiers.</i></p> <p><i>King.</i> Part them, they are incens'd</p> <p><i>Ham.</i> Nay come, againe.</p> <p><i>Osr.</i> Looke to the Queene there hoa.</p> <p>(Folio 1623, 281)</p>
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In his (1625) essay *On Revenge*, Francis Bacon calls the titular act “a kind of wild justice.” Shakespeare’s first printed edition of *Hamlet*, the first *quarto* (Q1), exudes the kind of wild nature of revenge in these three lines of stage directions depicting the climactic battle between Hamlet and Leartes¹ — both seeking revenge for their fathers’ deaths. Though reading the textual account of stage action pales in comparison to actually *seeing* the action performed onstage, Q1 gives a much more detailed — and to a degree, wild — account of the duel than its successor, the 1623 first folio. The two revengers “*catch*” each other’s swords — giving the reader the sense of urgency with which they grab one another’s rapiers, before both are “*wounded*” and Leartes falls to the ground. Suddenly, the Queen also “*falls downe*,” though Q1 makes the mistake of indicating that she “*dies*” before she has spoken her last line — “O the drinke, the drinke, *Hamlet*, the drinke.” Q1 paints a scene of chaos, of wild violence, and of the fatal result of revenge.

By contrast, the first folio (F) supplies the mediocre “*In scuffling they change Rapiers.*” The direction is informative — perhaps clearer to a modern reader than Q1’s “*catch*” — and ensures that the poisoned blade with which Laertes begins the duel ends in Hamlet’s hands. But there is no indication that either of the men have been wounded. There

¹ Variant spellings “Leartes” and “Ofelia” (as opposed to “Laertes” and “Ophelia”) are unique to Q1.

is nothing to suggest that the queen falls until Osric proclaims, “Looke to the Queene there hoa.” A reader must infer from the dialogue not only that both men have been affected by the poisoned blade (leading to their deaths moments later), but also that the queen has succumbed to the poisoned cup meant for Hamlet. A complex set of actions that perpetuate the rest of the scene’s action — and fatalities — must be gleaned by a reader of the folio from the dialogue alone, without the aid of narrative stage directions.

No doubt whoever picked up and read Q1 in 1603 was familiar with *Hamlet* on the stage; there were few other reasons to buy the text. Printed playbooks were meant primarily for those who enjoyed the play to have a memento from the fleeting performance — something to refer back to. A Folio reader in 1623, though, may have known a few of Shakespeare’s plays from the London theaters but almost certainly wasn’t familiar with *all* 36 of its plays. How could someone experiencing *Hamlet* on paper— unaided by the gloss of an academic editor — possibly infer from the technical “*In scuffling they change Rapiers*” the complete tableau offered by the 1603 Quarto? How could they picture the events of the duel, Gertrude’s eventual death, and the sense of panic conveyed by such tight dramatic action? The narrative voice Q1 offers serves not just to elucidate stage action, but to push the plot forward. The folio fails in that regard.

Not to privilege Q1 over the Folio, of course, for without the latter most of Shakespeare’s works would be lost to us. This “early modern” era of English literature during which the folio was printed coincided with classical re-discovery in the northern renaissance. Greek and Roman plays were translated and printed in the vernacular establishing the medium of dramatic text. This revealed history of theatrical tradition from Aeschylus to Seneca. Though the practice of theater-making expanded after the Romans,

there is little written record of it. Acting troupes toured in England throughout the middle ages, performing “morality” or “mystery” plays that presented biblical allegories or scenes. By the 16th century, with London rapidly expanding, plays were popular with the city dwellers — though companies would still tour throughout the early modern era (especially when the London theaters were closed by the plague). However, plays did not enjoy the literary and artistic prestige they are valued with now; they were not works of art to be revered or studied. Plays were cheap spectacles. Their poetic and dramatic value was of smaller consequence to their spectators. All that mattered to a Londoner in 16th– and 17th– century England was the entertainment value of the show.

Plays were not the only cheap entertainment in town either. Theaters were often flanked on either side by even more unpredictable spectacles. Bear-baiting — a sport which involved chaining a bear to a post in the middle of a coliseum-like audience and releasing packs of dogs to attack it — was a popular pastime of early modern England. Prominent fencing schools also gave exhibitions and hosted tournaments in similar sporting theaters. Playhouses, having to compete with these spectacles — one bloody and savage, the other combat-based — integrated both into their stage business. Audiences saw staged duels, battles, and murders which, although acted, rivaled the violence of bear-baiting and fencing by combining theatrical combat with real (staged) bloody death. The enjoyment derived from watching bloody spectacles on the stage ensured that narratives containing violent stage action would thrive — so theaters capitalized on it. Thus the violence-soaked genre of *revenge tragedies* was born. Beginning with Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* (1592)², many plays were written and performed that built upon themes of revenge, deception, and above all,

² Denotes date of first publication, not performance.

violence. While just one of the many genres of the time,³ revenge tragedies maintained steady popularity with audiences through the Jacobean and Caroline eras⁴ until the theaters closed after the civil war in 1642. They found their way into every major playwright's oeuvre, from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), to Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1602), Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (1623), and Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633). There is no one clear formula for a revenge tragedy but they generally narrate the protagonist's quest for vengeance after the unjust death of someone close to them. Revenge is the only course of action because the antagonist is in a position of power (Emperor, Duke, Prince, Don, etc.) such that he can control the formal systems of justice in his favor. Some plays like *Titus Andronicus* draw out the preliminary injustice plot so that only towards the end of the story is a character compelled to make a rash, violent, act of revenge. *Hamlet* (1603) and others spend the majority of the narrative on the avenger questioning the moral aspects of violence, revenge, and justice - which often drives them mad (*Hamlet*, Heironimo in *Spanish Tragedy*). No matter what, the plays almost always climax with the death of the *revenger* and the antagonist with a host of other casualties. Anyone who survives has a clean state to build a new society free from the original corruption.

Aside from the spectacle of violence that always accompanied them, Revenge Tragedies were popular because of their satire of the ruling class. Though revenge tragedies were written under Queen Elizabeth I (r.1558-1603), the genre flourished after James I ascended to the throne in 1603 and ushered in a lavish and fashionable new court. Plays of different genres attacked the king in different ways. According to Gary Taylor, Thomas

³ City-comedies, histories, and pastorals are some other genres that became prominent, but as with any medium, early modern drama is difficult to separate into neat categories. Even revenge tragedies, as we will see, prove difficult to identify under unifying structures or styles.

⁴ The reigns of King James I and Charles I, respectively.

Middleton's *A Game at Chess* (1624), which represented the English and Spanish courts as chess pieces, "provoked action by the King, the Earl of Pembroke, and the Privy Council, which not only closed down the play but (for a while) closed down all the London theatres, fined the King's Men, ordered a manhunt for Middleton, interrogated his son, and eventually jailed the author in the Fleet prison" (Taylor 1773). Revenge tragedies tackled the moral aspect of power and justice in the face of corruption — which often took on a lavish nature as the revelrous backdrops in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), and Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) indicate.

These plays cannot be understood without an appreciation and knowledge of the stage action that drives the plot forward. "Stage action" is not just limited to a character's death but includes the *way* in which they die, are wounded, or are beaten by another. The *rhetoric* of violence in revenge tragedies is essential to understand the underlying motives and greater cultural context of these politically charged bloody spectacles. So, when our 1623 reader arrives at the final scene of *Hamlet*, how are they supposed to make sense of the unique action of the scene and the thematic and moral implications of three characters being poisoned and the succeeding events? Stage directions are the only narrative signs a reader of dramatic texts has. While this may seem painfully obvious to those who have been engaging with not only Shakespeare but also contemporary dramatic texts, we must keep in mind that this was the birth of a new medium in Renaissance England. Printers, playwrights, scribes, and anyone else involved in the process of creating early modern dramatic texts had to navigate the unknown territory of narrative clarity in a medium that was (and continues to be) grappling with capturing a visual and aural spectacle within the confines of a book.

Interpreting these early stage directions as set down in text and read by a literate audience can give some insight to the apparent bloodlust of renaissance audiences at the turn of the 17th century. Aside from investigating this ever-present spectacle of violence, these signifiers of stage action can unpack the larger cultural and political ideas which these plays attempted to convey in their own time. There is, of course, the noticeable struggle of early compositors to convey real visual action to the medium of a book, and their choice of rhetoric in stage directions reflects this. As plays evolved from cheap spectacle to revered entertainment, so stage directions evolved from a technical language of theatrical jargon to one which readers could comprehend and appreciate for their narrative presentation. Looking at three specific plays of the later-Elizabethan and early Jacobean eras (when the genre of revenge tragedies was reaching its height of popularity) and deciphering the stage directions in their early printings can help to elucidate how early modern readers would have experienced the stage violence on the page. First, the 1601 “bad” quarto of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a unique text based directly on a staged production and demonstrates the process of transcribing stage action to the page. Then, Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607) is an arguably satirical take on the genre of revenge tragedies, and as such makes bold use of the tropes and creative violence common to and reflective of the genre and. Finally, a later quarto of Webster’s *The White Devil* (1631) shows a more literary take on depictions of violence in its intricate use of stage direction. These three plays can be used as a lens to analyze the cultural implications and motives behind the bloody narratives of revenge tragedies and the audiences who first picked them up from booksellers to read.

Printing Stage Action

Emma Smith, in her *Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare*, stresses that, “many critics of Shakespeare think it unlikely that such stage directions as exist in [Shakespeare’s] plays are authorial.” Instead, she says they give us glimpses into how the plays *could* have been performed (57). While Smith is right to advise caution against seeing stage directions as “authorial,” the picture is a bit more complicated. It is difficult to determine where along the process of “stage to page” stage directions were inserted - and *who* inserted them. David Scott Kastan, in his illuminating study on Shakespeare and the medium of text — *Shakespeare and the Book* — elucidates the process of printing texts and the social conditions which allowed their printing. Because plays were disregarded as a medium, they only comprised a very small portion of the book trade (alongside pamphlets and flyers) (22-23). They were not the most secure investment either, and usually only returned a profit if the play proved popular enough to warrant a second edition. So why publish them? Because they *could be* published. Because of a lack of copyright laws or any other protection (or even notion) of intellectual property, play manuscripts were readily available to publishers from any number of sources. Kastan sums up the predicament nicely:

“Unquestionably plays were often published without their author’s consent or even knowledge, and in forms of which no doubt their playwrights would never have approved; but this should not be taken as anything more than evidence of the usual — and fully legal — procedures of the contemporary book trade. A potential publisher would purchase a manuscript of a play, which might in some cases be authorial, though it could as well be a scribal copy made for the acting company or for a collector, or a transcript made by one or more actors. For the potential publisher it made no difference; no one of these granted the publisher any clearer authority over the text.” (Kastan 25)

In cases such as Jonson and Webster, who published their own works, the authority of the text is intact because the author (presumably) chose the *best* manuscript to publish. But for

Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries, their original works passed through many disrupting filters before they reached the publisher. If a manuscript is based on a scribal copy, it may be cut or contain changes for a particular performance (ex. the exclusion of the deposition scene [IV.i] in early quartos of Shakespeare's *Richard II*). If it is recalled from the memory of an actor, or worse, an audience member, not only is it subject to human error in memory, but it also only represents an instance of the work — one unique production that may have made changes to the original play.

In addition to the ambiguous origin of the manuscript, the actual process of printing once a publisher had acquired the text further removes it from the authorial original. Tiffany Stern reveals the source of many evident (and not so evident) printing errors in her book *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page*. Punctuation alone can function to change the meaning of different lines and the printer's decision to "fill in the blanks" of the manuscript — or conversely the author's failure to provide punctuation while writing — creates confusion on the page (138). Sometimes it is simply a lack of resources: in act IV of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock and Bassanio suddenly begin ending their declarative lines with question marks: "*Bass*. This is not auns^{er} thou unfeeling man, / to excuse the currant of thy cruelty? / *Jewe*. I am not bound to please thee with my answers?" (152). This is not some existential crisis on the part of Shylock and Bassanio. Instead, quite simply, "the compositor [of the playbook] has run low on full stops (periods)," and has resorted to using question marks in place (153). By far the biggest obstacle to transcribing texts accurately, though, was that in early modern England (at the turn of the 17th century) the English language had no standard conventions of spelling. Again in the case of the deposition scene in *Richard II*, the lines beginning "Aye, no, no Aye" could be synonymous

with “I, no, no I” or any variation thereof. The homophones “heir,” “hair,” “air,” and “e’er” cause constant turmoil. The letters “v” and “u” were interchangeable in print, making “loud” indistinguishable from “lov’d” (155). Stern even goes so far as to recreate the upper- and lower- “cases” where printers stored the different characters and explains how letter substitutions could occur by simply reaching into the wrong (but adjacent) case. All these ambiguities and more complicate these texts at the sentence, word, and character level (character here referring to individual printed letters and symbols). Though these changes may be small, they have a big impact. Stage directions fall prey to all of the above hazards and one other: their complete oversight in the manuscript. Stage directions occupy paratextual position on the margins of the page or crammed in between bits of dialogue – making them liable to fall through the editorial cracks.

As we will see, however, there are indeed some stage directions that *are* “authorial” - mostly in the case of Ben Jonson’s 1616 Folio of his *Workes*. For others, the tone of an “author” or at least a theater-maker is evident by the construction of the stage direction and its tone. In the transfer from playhouse to book — from a medium of aural and visual cues to one dependent on literacy and an appreciation of poesy — printers, compilers, scribes, and everyone else involved in the process needed to find a way to bridge the gap of representation.

Much like spelling, there was no standardization in the process of creating stage directions in early Elizabethan drama. During the theater-making process, stage directions were supplied from cues in the text (whatever the “text” might have been — a manuscript, a scribal copy, or a part with only one actor’s lines and cues). The rehearsal process no doubt added more stage action and, like any good show, during the whims of performance new

actions may have been improvised. Already we see a system of diffusion where stage directions are easily lost, added, and amended. By the time we reach the printer, a text can be as far removed as the scribbles of someone in the audience transcribing the play as they watched it or as close to the “original” as the author’s manuscript (which still may not fully capture the workings of the stage) (Kastan 24-30). Stage directions in early modern dramatic literature pose a challenge to editors and readers trying to make sense of the stage action outside of what is implied within the spoken lines.

Earlier play texts of the 16th century had bulky stage directions uncleanly dispersed through the dialogue. Not only were these directions hard to read, but also difficult for the early modern reader to understand. What we consider a standard dramatic convention was new territory, and even straightforward stage directions could make no sense to someone without the technical vocabulary (Dessen viii). From the 1590s on, stage directions became more standardized from quarto to quarto — which until Jonson’s *Workes* was the standard format for printed play texts. This was perhaps the only shared language between Renaissance dramatists practicing sometimes wildly different writing styles. The ensuing textual conversations created, what Dessen calls, a “theatrical vocabulary found in the tens of thousands of stage directions that constitute primary evidence for what we know (or think we know) about the presentation of such plays to their original audiences.” (Dessen vii) With this standardization, printers and readers would have had an easier time making sense of the onstage action in print.

Michela Calore’s distinction between “fictional” stage directions and “theatrical” stage directions draws a contrast in stage directions meant for the “page” as opposed to the “stage” (117-18). “Fictional” stage directions use terms that fit into the narrative’s context to

describe its set, props, and stage action. For example, if a scene dictates that a king must be situated on the walls of a castle while addressing those below we might read, “*Enter King on the walls.*” “Theatrical” stage directions, on the other hand, employ the technical language of stage-craft that theater-makers would have understood easily. Instead of “*the walls*,” one employing theatrical stage directions would say, “*Enter King, above*” replacing the specific scenery of the walls with the nondescript “above” to allow for the direction to hold true independent of the specific qualities of the different theaters in renaissance London. Many early modern theaters shared similar components — a thrust stage, gallery seating, a pit for “groundlings,” a roof over the main section of the stage, a balcony upstage where musicians could sit and characters could appear, etc. However, the rapid evolution of theater-making in London lead to changes in the construction of theaters themselves. By the end of the era the most fashionable theaters were not the open air thrust stages like the Globe but the more confined, intimate, and malleable indoor theaters like Blackfriars. Therefore, although a script may say “*Enter King on the walls*” a particular theater might not have the resources to create a set piece resembling a wall — using whatever kind of onstage balcony the theater possessed. The dichotomy between fictional and theatrical stage directions shows the mindset of the compiler of the to-be-printed text in regarding the work as a document of performance or a narrative independent of its original performance context. In general, a healthy amount of both appear throughout every text with stage directions. However, “fictional” directions serve a better function in informing the reading audience of the formal qualities of the narrative’s world. For a reader, reading the King entering *on the walls* creates a mental image that most theaters could never represent — an illustration of the power dynamic between the divinely appointed king speaking down to his subjects.

“Above,” on the other hand, for anyone who would have stepped into a theater of the time, would conjure the image of the King standing on a wooden balcony maybe six or seven feet in the air. When fictional stage directions are used, we can infer that a choice was made between simply recording the happenings onstage and actually re-contextualizing a play’s narrative.

“Volpone is brought in, as impotent” — Ben Jonson’s Folio

In 1616, Ben Jonson published a folio entitled: *Workes*. This included not only his dramatic texts but also his poetry and masques. As plays were still seen as something less than literary, Jonson had to deal with the fallout of his contemporaries criticizing him for the “audacity” to present stage plays as *Workes* of real literature. Presumably anticipating this pushback, Jonson took measures to present his plays and poetry in the most literary way possible. In so doing, Jonson made many edits and revisions *during* printing. While it was uncommon for a playwright of the time to publish his own work, it is even rarer for one to be so intricately involved in the printing process. Peter Wright notes that the *Workes*, “were seen through Stansby’s press with a meticulous care for design that must have taxed the patience of the printer” (257). But despite Stansby’s aggravations, the result is a piece of text that shows not just the final “intentions” of the author, but his process of adapting stage action from the medium of stage to the book. Jonson took the quartos many of his plays had been published as already (without his consent) and revised them — illustrating what *he deemed* was worth of the page.

Wright’s 1991 article, “Jonson’s Revision of the Stage Directions for the 1616 Folio *Workes*” claims that Jonson wanted to offer a text that was both readable and accurate, like other “great” works of literature at the time, in order to cement his literary reputation.

Folios, the coffee table books of renaissance London, were reserved for the most distinguished texts. Most printed material was related to religion — prayer books, bibles, sermons, etc. The literary epics of Chaucer and Spenser were printed in folios, as well as translations of Greek and Latin texts. The pages of folios were distinguished by their wide, clear margins, an uncluttered text — which Jonson strove to emulate in his *Workes*. Because the earlier quartos lacked this “classical” style of formatting, we find Jonson constantly apologizing to his reader in the paratext (epitaphs, introductions, inscriptions, etc.) for the flaws inherent in translating a dramatic text to the page. Wright notes that Jonson had a particular preoccupation not with the theater-goers but with his *reading* audience. If anything, he seems to even show a disdain for the theater and his contemporaries, aligning himself with the literary elite in his preambles, *against* playwrights who waste their poetic talent on “vain shows of visual spectacle and innovation” (258).

Jonson’s focus on his readers in his revision provokes the question: who was Jonson’s reader? The *Workes* represent an interesting turning point in dramatic literature where an author had to decide, “what his plays *were*, and what they were to do, and for whom they were intended” (259) These questions exceed Jonson, however, and apply to all of the playwrights of the era. While Jonson was perhaps the only one making active decisions in how to adapt his plays to another medium, the entire industry of Renaissance theater-makers and printers set the groundwork for the presentation of modern drama. The adaptations from Jonson’s quartos to the 1616 folio show the “tension” that the entire theater community was experiencing between the original spectacle of the stage and this new medium of dramatic literature.

Jonson had a flair for the presentation of his work. this fastidiousness is evidenced by his scrutiny over the printing process and the final version of the folio itself - distinguished by its clean appearance, wide margins, and revised spelling and punctuation (260). In revising, Jonson hoped his folio would resemble and fit into the canon of other great literary works of the time. This presentation, however, had to adapt to the conventions of new dramatic texts — including stage directions. Jonson’s re-working of his plays shows, perhaps, the first attempt at harmonizing the poetry of plays with their inherent stage-specific action.

In a technical sense, Jonson achieves the “classical” quality of other literature by copying old but confusing conventions like mass entrances and exits (264). Instead of indicating at what point during the dialogue a character’s entrance occurs, Jonson simply groups all of the entrances together at the beginning of each scene - even if one of the characters enters later. While helping to keep the margins clear of simple “*enter so-and-so...*” directions thereby giving the text a more “classic” look but also creating confusion as to who is actually present in the scene. On the other hand, Jonson does allow for individual entrances occasionally, but adds during his revision some modifying voice. For example, *Volpone*’s (1605-06) quarto is almost completely bare of any entrances or exits. While the folio only adds three, each are, in Wright’s words, “specialized, unconventional, and could be considered intended primarily for explication” (268). The directions indicate Bonario “*leapes out from where Mosca had plac’d him*” in III.vii and that the merchants “*rush in*” during V.ii. Exchanging the simple “*enter*” with the more descriptive verbs *leaps* and *rush in* already adds a fictional glaze, reducing jargon and showing Jonson’s literary hand. The last revised direction, “*Volpone is brought in, as impotent,*” which offers a passive entrance

(*brought in*) and an adjective (*as impotent*), that springs from the author's perception of his own narrative. The term "impotent" did not carry the sexual connotation it does today. Volpne's impotency was more likely one of physical weakness or helplessness rather than connoting sexual impotency (which would come to fashion a few decades later).⁵ But still, Jonson is giving his reading audience a detail that might not have been obvious in the theater. This choice is reflective of Dessen's sentiment that, "Jonson was a professional dramatist highly knowledgeable about his theatre, but... he often chose to augment his texts with a reader in mind" (xii-xiii). The Folio's addition of Volpone's physical state — springing either from Jonson's own hand or from reworking the text in rehearsals — informs the dialogue throughout the scene for a reader who cannot witness an actor's impotency onstage.

It is what Wright calls Jonson's "other" stage directions, however, that hold the most value for this discussion, as these are the ones depicting action *in* the scene. It is also with the "other" stage directions that Jonson is the most inconsistent in his revisions. The Folio's *Every Man Out of His Humour* (EMO) removes stage directions from the quarto that seem to elucidate stage action. Wright uses the example of, "*Enter Shift: Walkes by and uses action to his Rapier*" printed in the quarto but not the *Workes* (I2^V). We can understand "uses action" to mean clapping or flourishing his weapon for dramatic effect. Jonson's removal of the direction either completely disregards it as a moment of action in the narrative or puts the onus on his reading audience to infer it from the dialogue. In other places in the text, though, Jonson supports the dialogue with otherwise unknown stage action. In the quarto of *EMO* it is indicated that Fastidius Briske, in III.ix, takes tobacco through the simple vague

⁵ "impotent, adj. and n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Web. 15 October 2015.

direction — *[Tab]*. The Folio adds the more specific “*talkes, and takes tobacco betweene*” giving us a sense of movement and action during the rest of the dialogue. He uses the same format later in the scene when Briske “*takes down the violl, and plays between*” (M2-M2^V) adding the new element of music to the scene. While just simple explanatory sentences, these additions draw a sharp contrast to the ambiguous “*[Tab]*” of the quarto. This transition from theatrical to fictional stage directions seems to be a common theme in the folio with minor but impactful changes like *Exeunt* becoming “they disperse” (etc.) and with some plays including more intricate stage directions than others. *Volpone*, for example, while lacking individual entrances and exits in its margins, includes a variety of fictional stage directions to further the plot. From the simple “*One knocks without*” to the more complicated points where character’s appearances change: “[Enter Volpone and Mosca] *The first, in the habit of a commandadore: the other, as a clarissamo.*” or “*He puts off his disguise*” (Pp5^V, Vv5^V, Xx3).

Despite these small fictional exceptions, Jonson overwhelmingly relies on his reader’s close reading of dialogue to elucidate stage action. This was due in part to his coherence with the “classical” form, but also to the various complexities of his individual plays. Wright asserts that the changes that *are* made highlight moments Jonson felt were significant to his narrative. In doing so, the additional stage directions suggest Jonson “pointing” with his authorial hand to what was most important while removing directions that may have originated within the playhouse. The final result is an attempt to guide his readers through narrative action that never actually existed on the stage, while simultaneously “expunging from them all theatrical language” (278).

“Hamlet leaps in after Leartes” — William Shakespeare’s Hamlet Q1

Like Jonson’s *Workes*, the first quarto of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* presents a unique case in its printing, but for opposite reasons. While Jonson stressed having complete control over his published folio, the first quarto of *Hamlet* has been established (for better or worse) as so far from the authorial hand of Shakespeare that it might as well be a different play. Thus, after its discovery in 1823 it was soon dubbed the first of many “bad” quartos of Shakespeare’s works. These quartos were created from unreliable source texts that alter the play significantly while still being “true” to the original narrative. Some were transcribed *during* performance, birthing possibly the first instance of “pirated” media. Yet even if the audience-transcriber had reliable shorthand, the complexity of early modern drama in regards to meter and language use guarantees the “inaccuracy” of the text. Others were simply conjured from memory by someone working on the show — probably an actor who had a good sense of the lines. However, this again constrains the text to the realm of “inaccuracy” by the oft-discussed inaccuracy of human memory. On the surface, it is obvious to see why such texts were dubbed “bad” and thus unworthy of serious scholarship — but, again, the picture is a little more complex.

Zachary Lesser opens his article “The First Literary *Hamlet* and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays” with, “It has been generally agreed that the 1603 quarto of *Hamlet* (Q1), which is scarcely more than half the length of the 1604/5 quarto (Q2), is an acting version of the play” (371). In other words, Q1’s original manuscript originated from *some* production of *Hamlet* (perhaps in London, perhaps touring) and cuts down heavily on the original text. This should come as no surprise to anyone who has sat through an extended, or “complete,” production of *Hamlet* — the text in its entirety can take upwards of three hours

to perform, and cutting the script for performance is a standard practice. Shakespeare's audience had the same amount of patience as we do today, which is why the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* insists the story will be, "the *two* hours traffic of our stage" (emphasis mine). Though we read these plays in their entirety, early modern audiences only saw a cut version of the text onstage when they went to the theater. Lesser explains that, "Q1's origins were multifarious, encompassing everything from Shakespearean first drafts and revisions, to lingering fragments of the ur-*Hamlet*, to actors' memories, to spectators' shorthand, to supplementary non-Shakespearean botching" (380)

Despite its "botched" state, Q1 has a feature that later editions of *Hamlet* do not possess. Lesser argues that "commonplace" markers added in the printing of Q1 mark it as literary — a *reading* version of the play. These markers (which take the form of quotation marks (or inverted commas) come before several of Corambis' lines in scene 3, notably his advice to Leartes/Laertes which is formatted as such:

[Cor.] And they of *France* of the chiefe rancke and station
 Are of the most select and generall chiefe in that:
 " This aboue all, to thy owne selfe be true,
 And it must follow as the night the day

The double quotation mark before "This" single out this line and others for their literary value. Commonplace markers were becoming a common trend in new vernacular English texts. Starting with translations of Seneca, publishers would indicate important or memorable lines that they considered part of the English culture of literature with commonplace markers. Aphorisms, proverbs, and advice like Corambis' often received these markings — and their placement is too precise to suggest anything other than an editorial hand preparing the manuscript for print. Regardless of whose hand that was, the "bad" quarto of *Hamlet* is suddenly the first *literary Hamlet*. It tries, like Ben Jonsons

Workes, to establish drama as a serious literary medium. The bad quarto is, for all intents and purposes, a true production document which records a performance without the pesky hand of the author — yet still holds his language up through markers in an “attempt to forge a culture of literary drama and poesy in the vernacular” (Lesser 376). As shown before, Q1 already presents a more descriptive version of duel between Hamlet and Laertes. It also reveals a fascinating tension between using “fictional” and “theatrical” stage directions to describe the scenes.

Although the final scene makes bold use of fictional stage directions to give us something the folio does not, the beginning of the play falters in that respect. At the end of the fifth scene⁶ — after the Ghost has left Hamlet alone with his thoughts to be discovered by Horatio and Marcellus — Hamlet makes his friends swear not to reveal what they have seen. He is supported by the acousmatic⁷ voice of the Ghost in every version of the play, commanding the men to do the same:

Ham. Nay vpon my sword, indeed vpon my sword

Gho. Swear.

The Gost under the stage (D1^v)

While his omnipresent voice has the effect of accousmêtre on the characters, this is immediately destroyed for the readers by the closely following “*The [Ghost] under the stage*”. Knowing where the ghost is and that his voice is not actually disembodied (but in fact *embodied* by an actor under the stage) is a huge blow to the fictional quality of the scene and reinforces the reader’s consciousness of reading a play. Even the folio gives a slightly

⁶ Unlike later quartos which employed the five-act structure, Q1 of *Hamlet* is separated into numbered scenes. Scene five corresponds to I.v in Q2 and F

⁷ Acousmêtre, termed and defined by music theorist Michel Chion, is the “off-screen” voice in film which, because of its disembodied nature, possesses powers of omnipotence and omnipresence. For further reading see: “The Acousmêtre” in *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, ed. Timothy Corrigan et al. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011

more fictional interpretation by saying the ghost “*cries*” from under the stage — portraying a sense of the agony of the ghost’s current purgative state. It seems then that theatrical stage directions take away from the literary value of the printed play text — revealing the machinations of the theater and shattering illusion. The indicative direction *after* the line has been spoken aligns with the “pirating” theory — an audience member could locate the voice by being present in the space and after writing its dialogue, supplements it with location. It also allows for the possibility of an actor remembering that the ghost cried at this instant, but lacking the more unrestricted term of “*offstage*” to describe its location. Regardless, Q1’s reliance on the original transcriber’s perception of the production — what was or wasn’t important — is evident in its inconsistent mélange of fictional and theatrical stage directions to recall stage action. In other words, Q1 presents what an audience of the play would have found most striking and important about the stage action — an interpretation of *Hamlet*’s action through the eyes of a Londoner in 1603.

This awareness is also apparent in scene 9. Before Hamlet presents Claudius and the rest of the court with his *Mousetrap* play (3.2 in Q2 and F) the players give a short “dumb show”:

Enter in a Dumb shew, the King and Queen, he sits downe in an Arbor, she leaves him: Then enters Lucianus with poyson in a Viall, and powres it in his eares, and goes away: Then the Queene commeth and findes him dead: and goes away with the other. (F3^v)

Dumb shows were widely used to convey narrative structure to an audience who might not be able to make sense of the bombastic language. These dumb shows often serve as a prologue to a piece — as Hamlet’s does — summarizing the events of the play before launching into it so that the audience can focus more on the acting as opposed to making sense of the narrative. Though traditionally not accompanied by dialogue, early stage

practices that fall outside of recorded texts are very much a mystery to us. We know that several plays not only included but depended upon improvisation from popular clowns of the time⁸ — but the content of their material will always be lost due to theater’s ephemeral nature. Similarly, the dumb show could very well have incorporated some form of rehearsed or improvised dialogue or utterances.

This is all to say that the player’s dumb show in Elsinore might not have been all that dumb. Again, reading this as a production document reveals some interesting points. The specification of it taking place in an arbor, for example, indicates that there was some set piece onstage or other indication of the wooded setting. It specifies that Lucianus (the murderer) pours the poison “*in his eares*” as opposed to just “*poisons him*”, painting a more detailed image. The simple action-by-action direction in Q1 only records one perception of the production, of course, but in doing so highlights what we can imagine were the most striking features of the dumb show. However, out of the three distinctive texts of Hamlet we have access to (Q1, Q2, and F) it is the least descriptive. Both Q2 and F employ descriptors and fictional voices to provide a clearer transcription of the dumb show’s actions. Both texts specify that the King and queen embrace on their entrance, and that the king lies on a bed of flowers (neither mention an arbor). The folio adds that the pair enter “*very lovingly*” and that the queen “*makes a show of protestations*” to the king before he sleeps. Both specify that Lucianus⁹ takes off the king's crown and kisses it before he pours poison in the king’s ear. Both show the queen making “*passionate action*” finding the body of the king, and that when Lucianus returns he does so with others pretending to “*condole*” (Q2) or “*lament*” (F)

⁸ See Smith (11), and David Wiles *Shakespeare’s Clown* (1987 Cambridge UP) for further reading.

⁹ Only Q1 assigns Lucianus his name.

with her, and finally that the Queen doesn't give in to Lucianus' wooing at first but is "*harsh awhile*" (Q2) or "*loath and unwilling*" (F) before she submits.

After reading these, Q1's simple dumb show falls short of the literary value of later versions for which *Hamlet* is famous. But still, Q1 provides an example of someone actively trying to record a visual spectacle in print without any guide from an author: and it is imperfect, and lacks the nuances that make the parallels between the dumb show and Hamlet's own family more pronounced. But, it gets the gist of things, and makes obvious to Q1's reader the connection Hamlet has drawn by selecting (and augmenting) this play.

The dumb show is not the only direction to prioritize violent stage action over others. In scene 10 of Q1 (3.3 in Q2 and F), after the dumb show, Claudius has his soliloquy asking God for forgiveness and then retreating into prayer as Hamlet enters and contemplates murdering him. Only Q1 specifies that after Claudius' speech, "*Hee kneels enters Hamlet*" (G1). This presents Claudius in a state of reverent vulnerability, which later editions suggest by their mood, but only Q1 achieves by directing that "[*he*] *kneels*." Many have singled out Hamlet as an interesting revenge tragedy because Shakespeare provides a main character who falls short of his duty of revenge. This moment, when Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius because he is praying, is the critical moment of hesitation where Hamlet fails his father's ghost — and is later reprimanded for doing so. But Q1's emphasis on Claudius' vulnerable state makes Hamlet's decision not to kill him more believable and intense. Claudius on his knees isn't what Hamlet is after, nor does he want his uncle to escape the torments of hell by being murdered while praying (a sentiment shared by later revengers). Hamlet's determination that Claudius' soul be damned even intensifies his motives and character.

This rare act of violent-nonviolence (nonviolent in Hamlet's absence of action, violent in the underlying motive to make suffering eternal) is intensified by Hamlet's run-in with Leartes in scene 16 (5.1 in Q2 and F) during Ofelia's burial:

<i>Lear</i> . Forbear the earth a while: Sister farewell:	
<i>Leartes leapes into the graue</i>	
Now powre your earth on, <i>Olympus</i> hie,	
And Make a hill to o're top old <i>Pellon</i> :	<i>Hamlet Leapes</i>
Whats he that coniures so?	<i>in after Leartes</i> (II ^V)

Here I have attempted to maintain the approximate formatting of this direction — inserted on the right margin after Leartes' final two lines. Neither Q2 nor F include the direction that Hamlet leaps in “*after Leartes*” and only F specifies that “Laertes” jumps into the grave at all. In fact, the Arden editors of these two versions have glossed the direction with adding that Laertes “[*Leaps out and grapples with him*]” before his next line (Thomson & Taylor 338). As Q1's explicit direction for Hamlet to leap into the grave well shows, editorial gloss can provide modern readers with very different records of stage action. Rather than Hamlet selfishly disrupting the funeral, the phrasing of Q1's stage direction indicates that Hamlet is in fact trying to stop Leartes from jumping in his sister's grave and causing the same disruption. There is no indication in Q1 of the pair “*grappling*,” or wrestling, but it is not hard to imagine that the two men in a small grave could only engage in some physical altercation (Q1 doesn't specify when they come out of the grave, but they must to take their individual exits). This occurs in the “grave,” (stage trap door) where most audience members could not see, mystifying the violence for reader and spectator alike.

“A blasing-star appeareth” — Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*

Looking at two early printed texts of Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* reveals some interesting aspects of printing.¹⁰ The two versions in question, from 1607 and 1608, are seemingly identical in all but their cover pages which specify their dates. Even some of the more obvious printing mistakes that could have been easily corrected on a second printing are ignored - for example, after Vindice’s opening monologue the stage direction “Enter *her* brother Hippolito” (A1^V - emphasis mine). While Vindice’s gender is cleared up in later stage directions this automatically creates a massive confusion for the reader. The text further complicates itself when Hippolito is suddenly referred to as “Carlo” by his mother, Gratiana. These two oversights are indicative of a manuscript that was probably “authorial” — including original mistakes that Middleton would eventually return to fix such as naming characters. This is a precarious position, however, as the collaborative nature of theater in early modern England allows for any number of scenarios in which this is not, actually, Middleton’s hand. But, as we know, publishers were not necessarily concerned with the accuracy of the manuscripts as long as they sold. And the 1607 “first” quarto of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* must have sold well to warrant such a quick reprint just a year later.¹¹

Perhaps as suggested by its name, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* has no qualms about being a revenge tragedy. In fact it seems to embrace the genre with a satiric boldness — overemphasizing tropes like the revenger’s madness and the court’s corruption and thereby

¹⁰ Authorship of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* has always been disputed, with the original attribution being to Cyril Tournier with others suggesting Marston or even Shakespeare. The consensus in recent years is that it is, in fact, Thomas Middleton’s, and we will refer to it as such.

¹¹ R.A. Foakes, in his 1966 critical edition of the text states that while, “[s]ome copies of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* are dated 1607 on the title-page... this was corrected during the printing to 1608” (“The Text”). Yet, the play was entered into the Stationer’s Register on October 7th, 1607, by the printer George Eld.

complicating them even more than its predecessors. Yet, for a revenge tragedy, *The Revenger's Tragedy's* text does an inadequate job of translating the horrors of the stage to the book. Nowhere is it indicated, for example, that Vindice enters the first scene and delivers his monologue with Gloriana's skull in his hands. Although it is heavily insinuated by the subject matter of his soliloquy and Hippolito's response ("Still sighing o'er death's vizard?"), this detail escapes the reader. A similar exclusion is found in III.iv, when the guard enters to present the head of the "youngest brother" to Ambitioso and Supervacuo. Nowhere does it specify that he enters with a head — although the dialogue clears this up pretty quickly. Still, the exact qualities of the "yet bleeding head" are unknown to us. The brothers obviously do not recognize their junior, indicating that the head may be covered or so deformed that it is unidentifiable. But again, the reader of the text must insinuate all of this from the dialogue presented.

For all the gruesome deaths in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the author/compiler/printer chose to focus more on the non-fatal action when narrating stage action. In II.i, Vindice (in disguise) tries to woo his sister Castiza on Lussurioso's behalf. His effort is punished when Castiza delivers "*A boxe ath eare to her Brother*" (C3)¹². The selection of "*boxe*" instead of the more common "*strike*" might implicate a more playful manner about the violence - but Castiza intends harm nonetheless against this perceived "pander" and for the first time the reader is invited to visualize the violence before the dialogue indicates it. Yet for the most part, the first two quartos of *The Revenger's Tragedy* lack many of the stage directions necessary to actually comprehend the violence in the play as related to the plot. Even the deaths of the play's two major antagonists — the old Duke and Lussurioso — are hidden in

¹² Original spelling and formatting will be preserved in an attempt to avoid editorial gloss (which so frequently pervades our view of these work) unless a word or phrase's meaning is so opaque it requires further explanation.

the text without specifying the actual moment in which they pass. Taking these away leaves the *exact* nature of their deaths vague and open to the reader's interpretation - but at the cost of discontinuing the imagery of violence that permeates the play's narrative.

Despite these shortcomings, the quartos do go into quite a bit of detail when describing the several dumb shows in the text. Act V scene iii, the final scene of the show, opens:

*In a dum shew the possessing of the young Duke.
with all his Nobles: Then sounding Musick.
A furnisht Table is brought forth: then enters the Duke
& his Nobles to the banquet. A blasing-star appeareth. (12^V)*

This level of specificity is a departure from the vague stage directions earlier in the play. Not only does it establish an important plot point (the "*possessing*" of the "*young Duke*" Lussurioso is his coronation) but also sets an atmosphere for the following scene. The quintessential revenge tragedy *should* climax in so spectacular a display - the "*furnisht Table*," and "*sounding Musick*" continuing the revelry-in-spite-of-tragedy theme of the genre.

The dumb show also indicates that "*A blasing-star appeareth.*" For *The Revenger's Tragedy's* movement from stage to page, this appearance of the "[*blazing*]-star," is essential to understanding this text as its own fictional narrative as opposed to just a stage document. In the Shakespeare's first folio, Juno "*descends*" in act IV of *The Tempest* and in act V of *Cymbeline*, "[*J*]upiter *descends in Thunder and Lightning*" (F 14, 394). These descents indicate that the theatrical space needed to be outfitted to lower something from the ceiling and, thus, likens the folio more to a stage-document. Here, however, where the star "*appeareth*," what it looks like, and what is insinuated by "*blazing*" are left up to the interpretation of the reading audience. Though Lussurioso expresses his disdain for the star

later in the scene (“Beshrew thee, what art thou mad'st me start? / Thou hast committed treason: a blazing star!”) the reading audience already knows of its malicious presence. The stage audience, on the other hand, might have to have their attention redirected from the stage to somewhere “above” (i.e. the ceiling or balcony/music room). Knowing, however, that the star’s appearance coincides directly with Lussurioso’s ascension (since they are both within the same direction) would strike a larger chord with the reading audience with the direct relation of this ominous symbol and Lussurioso gaining power.

The final moments of the play take on a much more descriptive quality through a type of dumb show: masques. Again, the convention of masking violence in revelry is incorporated as the two sets of killers — Vindice, Hippolito and “others” vs. Ambitioso, Supervacuo, and Spurio - both decide to hide their intentions of killing Lussurioso behind actual “masques.” Masques were a popular form of royal entertainment that took advantage of the court’s largess in creating extravagant spectacles. Many authors of the time — Middleton included — lent their playwriting talents to creating vibrant masques for the court audience. So it makes sense that Middleton would choose a masque to disguise his murderers — further satirizing James I’s perceived “luxury.” It is also not the most original convention — Thomas Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* (arguably the progenitor of the revenge tragedy genre) culminates in the murders of Balthazar, Lorenzo, and Bel-Imperia during a play. Their murders become obscured by the juxtaposition of feigned death and real murder, leading the King of Spain and Viceroy of Portugal as audience members to compliment the young actors on their dedication to the play — until they discover the true devastating consequences. As discussed, *Hamlet* also plays on this convention of representing violence as entertainment within the world of the play itself. Violence is false in dumb shows —

which makes it more real in the world of the characters that produces them. The self-awareness of these plays' inability to *actually* present violence and death onstage creates another satirical layer to their treatment of violence as entertainment.

The masques Middleton presents here, though, lack the grandeur and pomp of a real court masque - at least, that is what we can glean from their directions. It doesn't specify any dialogue or spectacle, just that: "*The Reuengers daunce?*"¹³ / *At the end, steale out their swords, and these foure kill the foure at / the Table, in their Chaires. It thunders.*"(I3^V)¹⁴ The "dance" no doubt shared some of the same formal qualities of the masques of the time which both the author and players would have experience in. It is harder to say what the original reader would imagine when greeted with the word "*dance*" — if part of the higher social class or members of the court, they would have some familiarity with what such a masque might look like. However, it is still difficult to say *who* exactly was reading these quartos and what their background knowledge not only of the play but the conventions of early modern theater would have been. Nonetheless, the prompting of the murders "[a]t the end" signals that the masque performed by the revengers would have been a somewhat fully formed show. Again, this use of entertainment-within-entertainment illustrates the falsity of both and heightens the dramatic tension when the revengers finally break the fourth wall and "*kill the Foure at the table.*" "*It thunders*" harkens back to the appearance of the "*blazing star*": Middleton is using these natural elements (outside of the control of humans) to draw a connection between the nature of revenge and divine will. Even without this stage direction, a reading audience could glean from Vindice's next line ("Mark thunder...") that this

¹³ The question mark at the end of "*The Reuengers daunce?*" is almost certainly *not* denoting this as a question - though our modern trained minds will jump to construe it as such. Instead, using question marks in place of "full stops" (periods ".") was common, especially in paratext such as stage directions when printers would run out of full stop characters compiling the dialogue on a given page.

¹⁴ Slashes "/" indicate line breaks in the original text.

supernatural occurrence correlates to Lussurioso's murder - just as the blazing star foreshadowed his death. But again, informing the audience of the effect (in this case, a loud sound possibly offstage) before the characters have a chance to remark on it recreates in some ways the experience of being in the theater. We are, as readers, experiencing these strange phenomena at the same time (or in some cases even before) the characters in the story experience them.

The second masque follows immediately after Vindice and Hippolito's exit from the scene of their crime.

*Enter the other Maske of entended murderers? Step-sons; Bastard;
and a fourth man, comming in dauncing, the Duke recouers a
little in voyce, and groans,- -calls a guard, treason.
At which they all start out of their measure, and turning towards
the Table, they find them all to be murdered. (I3^V)*

Again, the narrative "pointing" of "*they all start out of their measure*" indicates that the dance has to go on for some amount of time before Lussurioso ("*The Duke*") recovers. The call for a guard ceases the revelry and causes the "[*intended*] *murderers*" to stop in their dancing tracks. The humor of this action may be lost in the transcription to the first quarto, but the dry direction that "*turning towards / the Table, they find them all to be murdered*" immediately replaces the revelry with violence. The ensuing whiplash for the characters discovering the bodies (when the audience has already witnessed their deaths) creates unique comedy that only violence and human evil can achieve. On stage, this can take the form of the actors stumbling out of their dance and then, after the discovery, resuming the stylized violence created by their desire for Lussurioso's dukedom. On the page, all we have is this stark direction and the following dialogue indicating the murderers' disregard for the victims' lives and relief that their job is already done ("Here's a labour sav'd").

The major distinction between the two masques, however, is the reference to Spurio, Ambizioso, Supervacuo, and the “fourth man” as “[*intended*] *murderers*”. This not only designates their role but differentiates them from the previous killers who were not “*murderers*,” but “*revengers*,” The distinction serves the narrative function of establishing moral characteristics of these killings outside of the dialogue. Here we have Middleton (or, again, whoever compiled the text for printing) indicating a difference in the nature of these two acts of violence. Both intend to murder Lussurioso (and killing members of his court is surely a bonus) yet the protagonists of the show — Vindice and Hippolito — are excused of the reality of their violence. Their cause exonerates them from the brutal title of “murderer” to the noble “revenger.”

Despite the difference in title, this highly stylized method of violence the “revengers” and the “murderers” alike choose to employ (the masques) illustrates the ritualistic nature of mass killings on the stage. Zoltán Márkus writes that the “mayhem” which the groups create in covering their motives behind a spectacle of a masque, “brings about gruesome mechanical violence.” (272) “Mechanical violence” insinuates a kind of rhythmic and rehearsed action — much like any ritual sacrifice. Vindice and the others choreograph their murder, starting with the masque dancing, climaxing with the revealing of their weapons and murdering of the court. Like a high priest slaughtering a sheep in the temple of Jerusalem during the high holy days, there is a specific “mechanical” process through which the killing must take place. In the case of religion it can involve any amount of prayers and ritual blessings of the sacrifice to ensure it is sufficient for God. For Vindice, the masque is similarly *necessary* in killing Lussurioso — not only for the practical purpose of giving him an opportunity to strike, but also for the rhetorical purpose of having the

lavishness of the court (represented through the masque) be Lussurioso's downfall. The resounding thunder after the fact is equivalent to a god's approval of a sacrifice - though in Vindice's case it may be the greater concept of Revenge itself that approves. In the same way, the fact that the murderers' mechanical violence is prevented; forces them to kill each other to satisfy the ritualistic need for bloodshed.

“Brachiano seems here neare his end” — John Webster’s *The White Devil*

It was 19 years before John Webster's violence-soaked tragedy, *The White Devil* (1612), was reprinted in the 1631 second quarto. The first quarto's printing was an anomaly itself as *The White Devil* had a disastrous opening at the Red Bull theater in 1612. Webster himself comments upon the play's reception in a note at the beginning of the 1612 text: “[S]ince it was acted, in so dull a time of winter, presented in so open and black a theatre, that it wanted [...] a full and understanding auditory” (Webster 5). The “understanding auditory” (audience) Webster's play “wanted” (needed) for its premier was usurped by an audience which he, ironically, calls “those ignorant asses (who visiting stationers' shops, their use is not to enquire for good books, but new books)”. Perhaps this observation is why Webster was so eager to apparently take his own book to print shortly after its stage failure in 1612. It is difficult to determine whether Webster presided over his play's printing with the same level of scrutiny as Jonson — though Webster suggests that “the author [resolved] to fix every scene” — still, it would seem by the details of its printing and the literary value of its paratext (including stage directions) that Webster's voice dominated the compositor's (6). This is not to make the assumption that *The White Devil* is an authoritative text. But Webster's preface does influence a reading of the text, especially since he praises the “copious industry of Master Shakespeare, Master [Thomas] Dekker, and Master [Thomas]

Heywood, wishing what I write may be read by their light.” Webster preferred his works, it seems, to be read as opposed to acted. And, in *The White Devil*’s case, the only way to preserve his narrative after the failed premiere was to publish a play text. Webster’s regard for his own dramatic texts precedes the literary status that they did not achieve until after the restoration. Yet his faith in play texts as an appropriate medium to record his narratives proves he saw the literary value of them. Perhaps Webster capitalized on the literary value *The White Devil* contained when revising it for publication.

The second quarto (1631) was published soon after the play’s revival by Queen Henrietta’s Men. Because the literary value of plays had increased by this time, *The White Devil* — with its expanded fictional stage directions and paratext — would obviously come back into popularity. Of the four texts discussed, it is the most meticulous with stage direction. It both conveys the stage action and provides a narrative voice to place it in the greater context of the play. Webster doesn’t hold any punches when fabricating stage violence — and an artistic hand can be perceived in many of the play’s gruesome murders.

Flamineo’s murder of his brother Marcello in V.ii, for example, is as quick in its presentation as the action itself: “*Flamineo runnes / Marcello through*” (I3^V). The verb “*runnes*” is used elsewhere in early modern dramatic texts, notably *Othello*, and *Antonio’s Revenge*, but even in these cases “running through” carries a different connotation than the more popular *strikes (down)*, *stabs*, or, the always reliable *kills* (Dessen 124, 210-211, 219). Flamineo has barely entered the scene and told Marcello he has “brought [his] weapon back,” before charging at his brother and “*runnes [him] through*.” The action is in synchronization with the dialogue — Flamineo enters, he approaches his brother while saying his line, he reaches him and immediately kills him. The rashness of the murder

illustrates the instability of Flamineo's mind underneath his malcontented guise. His mother, Cornelia, reacts to Flamineo's fratricide with a similarly descriptive direction: "*She runs to Flamineo / with her / knife drawne and / comming to / him, let's it fall*" (I4). Not only is the reader given the same kind of violent-motion as Flamineo earlier with "*runs*," but a whole mental narrative is constructed through Cornelia's indecision to kill her own son. By indicating that she "*lets [the knife] fall*" at the last moment the reader is privy to an experience of tension and apprehension that otherwise could only be possible in the theater. It is also important to note that these five lines of stage directions are aligned to the right side of the page while Cornelia's ten-line monologue condemning Flamineo is physically situated on the same lines but aligned to the left. A reader would be forced to read the direction and the dialogue at the same time — Cornelia's lines on the left running into the stage directions on the right — or choose which to read first. Either way, the formatting indicates a moment in which stage action is aligned with dialogue to give the impression of the two happening simultaneously. This makes the action and the words as inextricable on the page as they would be on the stage — the direction illuminates the dialogue and vice versa.

Act V is bursting with these short moments of quick violence, creating a quick rhythm of action that build to *The White Devil*'s climax and conclusion. Before Brachiano's extended death in V.iii, the scene begins in a Middletonian fashion by couching violence within the spectacle of revelry. The corrupt duke, hiding away from the world and responsibility with his new bride, Vittoria, decides to have some sport at the "barriers." Christina Luckyj, editor of the New Mermaids edition of the play, indicates that "[t]he fight at barriers, a spectacle for the Red Bull stage, was a highly formal ceremonial combat...

rapidly disappearing from courtly life.” (126) “Barriers” refers to, “The palisades enclosing the ground where a tournament, tilting, or other martial contest or exhibition was held; the lists” (OED). Supposedly, the theater was constructed in such a way that some version of this traditional “martial contest” was represented and recognizable for a Jacobean audience - or Webster creates fictional “barriers” to paint a more vivid scene for his readers. Luckyj gives an interpretation of the symbolism in the fight, signaling a duel between the corrupt revelers and the morally just in the fashion of traditional “ceremonial combat”. The direction itself, however, is important for this discussion because of its specificity: “*Charges and shouts : they fight at barriers; / first single paires, then three to three. / Enter Brachiano & Flamineo, with others*” (I4^v). The sonic clash of “*Charges and shouts*” opening the scene, coming from the unknown, resonates with the acousmatic elements of the ghost in *Hamlet* setting a tone of uneasy apprehension for what is to come. Then, Webster provides not just details of the type of staged fight, but specifies the order in which they are presented fighting. “*first single [pairs], then three to three*” provide an image of violence building upon violence: first the six combatants duel individually, then the form breaks down into a chaotic six-person fight. Though Brachiano is signaled as entering after the fight, the direction functions as more of a narrative transition between V.ii and V.iii that he takes part in (as one of the six). His “entrance” with Flamineo breaks away from the chaos of the fighting to reveal that the staggered duke has been poisoned through his helmet. From this simple indication of onstage sport, Webster furthers the plot with Brachiano’s poisoning and creates a vivid stage action for the duke to falter under - all in the name of revelry.

Brachiano’s ensuing death also has a level of specificity and narrative to it that really sets Webster’s use of stage directions apart from his contemporaries. For starters, he

elongates his poisoning so that between when he takes his poisoned “beaver” (helmet) off, and when he actually dies, five quarto-page’s worth of dialogue is spoken — some of which is his. Stepping away from stage directions for the moment, Webster presents a different type of violence altogether in Brachiano’s final suffering and last words: “He will be drunk: avoid him: th’argument is fearful when churchmen stagger in’t. Look you; six gray rats that have lost their tails crawl up the pillow; send for a rat-catcher. / I’ll do a miracle: I’ll free the court / From all foul vermin” (V.iii.120-124). His rapid switching between prose and verse coupled with hallucinations and (while symbolic to a degree) nonsensical utterances display his vulnerable mental state. If this was not enough to inform the reader of Brachiano’s madness, aligned on the right margin of these lines, makes it pretty obvious:

*Brachiano / seems here neare / his end Lodovico / and Gasparo in the habit of
Capuchins, / present him in his / bed, with a cru- / cifex and hallowed / candle. (K2)*

Brachiano “seeming” near his death adds a temporal quality towards his suffering and decay that other deaths in this genre do not focus on. Much like Corneila’s moment with the knife discussed above, because of the formatting of the text the reader must choose whether to read the dialogue or the stage direction first — or read each line in full with the two running into each other. Regardless, the fictional voice of the stage directions countered by Brachiano’s ravings present a very disorienting experience to readers that echo Brachiano’s own madness. Madness is so often cited as an ingredient for revenge tragedies, but rarely do we see madness enforced unwillingly in the moments before death.

These are Brachiano’s final words, accompanied by a short “Vittoria! Vittoria!” at line 166, indicating a slight reprisal of the poison (“O the cursed devil, / Coming to himself again. We are undone”). However, despite being poisoned several pages ago, Brachiano finally succumbs at line 173 to the conspirators, led by Lodovico, suffocating him:

Brachiano is strangled (K3). Though simple, this is effective in conveying Brachiano is finally dead. What's curious, however, is Vittoria's presence during this moment. Q2 specifies five lines before Brachiano's death to "*Enter Vittoria and the attend[ant]*", and six lines after his death "*Vit. O mee I this place is hell. Exit Vittoria*" (K3). Yet, it is never spoken that Vittoria knows her husband's killer's identity. There is a difficulty in understanding the layout of the stage for this moment: could the two groups be separate so that the audience saw Vittoria but she could not see Brachiano being strangled? Editors try to throw this away as a printing error — Luckyj inserts an additional exit and entrance for Vittoria so that she is not onstage when Brachiano dies. Luckyj and Thomson believe that the increased movement would create a farcical juxtaposition to "Brachiano's isolation and stillness in death" (136). Looking at Q2 though, Vittoria's entrance and exit are very purposeful — the former occupying a line all to itself and the latter following directly after Vittoria exclaims "this place is hell." Though Vittoria does not mention the particulars of Brachiano's death, or the identity of his killers, it is still important considering Webster's involvement with the script that she *is* present for his strangulation. While a small detail, it certainly amplifies the spectacle of Brachiano's already drawn out death. Not only has he lost his mind and suffered mentally, but now he will finally die an excruciating death surrounded by the conspirators and his own wife. Despite the inevitability of death by poison, the choice to end Brachiano by strangulation adds another element of onstage contact and action that exceeds the grotesqueness poison alone would provide. Like the old Duke in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and Claudius in *Hamlet*, Brachiano cannot be allowed an easy death by poison or direct access to heaven. He must be damned, and thus his murder through strangulation becomes another ritualistic element of revenge.

Though the discussed above fifth act does hold a great supply of fictional and violent stage directions, Webster's flair for fictional stage directions shows in the two dumb shows of II.ii. The convention of the dumb show is familiar by now, but Webster puts a new spin on the presentation of the narrative convention. Instead of witnessing a play or masque within the play, the audience witnesses visions presented to Brachiano by "*one in the habit of a Conjuror*" of his wife, Isabella, and his lover Vittoria's husband, Camillo, be assassinated by his various agents. The dumb shows, though long, are presented in full and with the spelling of the 1632 printing for the reader's benefit to see the text as a renaissance reader would. The sections will be glossed, however, to make them more understandable, in the following discussion.

A Dumbe Shevv,

Enter suspiciously Julio and Christophero, they draw a curtaine where Brachian's picture is, they put on spectacles of glasse, which couer their eyes and noses, and then burne perfumes afore the picture, and wash the lips of the picture, that done, quenching the fire, and putting off their spectacles they depart laughing

Enter Isabella in her night gowne as to bed-ward, with light after her Count Lodouico, Giouanni, Guid-antonio, and others weighting on her, shee kneeles downe as to prayers, then drawes the curtaine of the picture, doe's three reuerences to it, and kisses it thrice, shee faints and will not suffer them to: come nere it, dies, sorrow exprest in Giouanni and in Count Lodouico. Shees conueid out solemnly (D4^V)

What's immediately evident is Webster's specific description of Julio and Christophero poisoning Isabella's picture compared to *Hamlet's* "*enters Lucianus with [poison] in a [Vial], and [poures] it in his [ears], and goes away.*" From the first adverb "*suspiciously*" Webster creates a very image calling to mind practices of witchcraft and requiring a certain amount of stage effects. The ritualistic preparation of the poison goes above and beyond just mixing together ingredients; the pair put on their safety goggles ("*Spectacles of [glass]* ") and proceed to "*[burn] perfumes [before] the picture.*" Their

gestures are almost religious, recalling the donning of vestments and burning of incense — aided by a young apprentice like an altar boy; in this case young and silent Christophero. The doctor's assistant, like several other characters in *The White Devil* are “ghost” characters. There exist an entrance and/or exit for these characters — like Christophero's above — but never utter any printed dialogue. The inclusion and argued importance of these character's in the background of various scenes again seems to accentuate the idea that Webster had some purpose for them to be included and thus kept them in the final text — even though they never spoke and rarely had any characterization besides Christophero's above collaboration in Isabella's death.

Isabella's death, like Brachiano's later on, becomes a bit of a spectacle not only witnessed by the reader and Brachiano, but Lodovico, young Giovanni, and Guid-Antonio (another ghost character) as well. Though Giovanni is her son and expected to be by his mother, the presence of Lodovico is revealing about the nature of his relationship to Isabella — especially when the reader is informed that there is “*Sorrow [expressed]*” on the part of both he and young Giovanni. The dumb show reveals that he held affection for Isabella, and uses this as impetus to bring him back to Brachiano for vengeance. Her “*not [suffering] them to come [near]*” echo's Gertrude warning to Hamlet as she dies (“The drink, the drink!”) serving as a caution for Isabella's onlookers to beware the corrupt power of Duke Brachiano.

The second dumb show also involves another layer of spectatorship — though the assassination of Camillo goes less smoothly than Isabella's:

The Second Dumb Show,
Enter Flamineo, Marcello, Camillo, with foure more as Captaines; they drinke healths, and dance, a vaulting horse is brought into the roome, Marcello and two more whisper'd out of the roome, while Flamineo & Camillo strip themselues into their shirts, as to vault,

Flamineo *pitcheth him vpo his necke, and with the help of the rest, wriths his neck about, seeme's to see if it be broke & laies him folded double as 'twere under the horse; makes shows to call for halpe, / Marcello comes in, laments, sends for the Cardinall and Duke, who comes forth with armed men, wonders at the act, commands the body to be carried home, apprehends Flamineo, Marcello, and the rest, and goes as 'twere to apprehend Vittoria* (D4^V–E1)¹⁵

Seven players in all make up this short show — Flamineo, Marcello, and “[four] more as Captain[s]” — and three are complicit in Camillo’s death. Plus the Conjuror and Brachiano looking on, these nine onstage characters would have stretched the plays cast very thin and make use of ample doubling. But, despite the practicality of having fewer men kill Camillo, Marcello and the captains’ presence sticks out at a bold yet unclear choice on Webster’s part. It implicates Marcello enough to have him “*apprehend[ed]*” alongside Flamineo — but also seems (as if orchestrated by Flamineo) that the two captains who “*whisper*” him out of the room do so with the intention of hiding Camillo’s murder from him. The other two captains become accessories when Flamineo breaks Camillo’s neck “*with the help of the rest*”. Marcello, oblivious to the murder and assuming it was an accident with the vaulting horse, “*laments,*” and “*sends for the [Cardinal] and Duke.*” It does not specify if the other two captains return — so it is plausible that Cardinal Monticelso and Duke Fransisco were doubled with these ghost characters and the amount of people onstage remains nine (body included). But then the Cardinal and Duke “*come forth with*” an unspecified amount of “*armed men*”. Assuming it’s no more than two, there are now 11 players on the stage. Finally, Vittoria, who has not even been given an entrance, is also apprehended, bringing the grand total of actors onstage to 12 if the stage directions are to be believed. This was certainly not impossible. The King’s men had around 14 members at any given time for each

¹⁵ Slash “/” here indicates page break. “Marcello” first appears at the bottom of D4^V as a printing note to determine page order by writing the first word of the next page.

show (Smith 8); Queen Anne's men, who first performed the *White Devil* in its failed opening, listed ten theater-makers' names on their license granted in 1609 — but could have had actors who were not company members perform for certain shows. However, this does call the practicality of these directions into question with regards to staging. Possibly, Webster's printing text was a best-case-scenario for his work — if money was no object and casting no issue. This would explain not only the amount of characters he introduces, but the intricate descriptive quality of the dumb shows — the origin is not from a staged production with limitations but from Webster's unlimited imaginative narrative.

Flamineo is characterized throughout *The White Devil* as a very smart, possibly psychotic, and unnervingly immoral malcontent figure. His execution of Camillo reflects this. Like when he *runnes* Marcello through, Flamineo displays irreverence for his fellow man's life through his very physical murders — here taking Camillo “[*upon*] his [*neck*]” and “*writh[ing]*” him. Webster also specifies that Flamineo then checks to ensure that Camillo's neck “*be broke*” displaying a lack of concern over his own actions but rather their results regardless of the grotesqueness. The setting itself, with the ironic vaulting-horse, and its use during and after the murder also highlight Flamineo's sadistic nature further. He places Camillo's dead, shirtless body, “*folded double as 'twere under the horse*” emphasizes, as Luckyj argues, the horse's mounting of Camillo and is a “visual sign of his sexual inadequacy.” (50) Flamineo's arrangement — intentionally mocking the cuckolding of his own sister's husband — is ultimately his downfall. After his false “*call for [help]*” the Cardinal, Duke, and their several armed guards come in and, “[*Wonders*] *at the act*, *commands the body to be carried home, apprehends* Flamineo, Marcello, *and the rest, and goes as 'twere to apprehend Vittoria*” (E1). Through this description of the Cardinal and

Duke's *wondering* at the act, Webster justifies Flamineo's arrest under the suspicious placement of the body and the gross image he has created. This echoes the final moments of *The Revenger's Tragedy* where Vindice confesses to all of his elaborate murders and receives punishment at the new Duke Antonio's hand instead of the praise he expected (V.iii.101-108). Flamineo's flair for the dramatic and his intellectual hubris instigate suspicion, and demonstrate the inevitability of divine justice catching up with the revenger.

Again, although Vittoria is named in the dumb show, her only appearance is through the stage direction's final words, "*and goes as 'twere to apprehend Vittoria.*" The Duke and Cardinal, having arrested the others, make for Vittoria — but that's where the direction ends. The audience and Brachiano are left in ignorance of her fate until the following scene. Despite Vittoria's excluded entrance, this moment of suspense has a large effect on a reading audience specifically. The sudden direction, for a reader who was not aware of Vittoria's presence, is striking both because of its presence and its lack of resolution.

More important than the language of Webster's dumb shows is their existence in the first place. These short, violent vignettes are produced as visions from the conjurer — not as short scenes of their own; not occurring offstage and only reported in dialogue. The medium of the dumb show is essential to these short sequences so that the specific rhetoric of each murder is preserved to the page. On the Red Bull stage, they may have included sound and dialogue to make the moments more dynamic. But, as presented on the page (and perhaps more meaningfully so) the dumb shows are short, wordless concentrations of creative and fatal violence that force the reader to recreate the image through their descriptive, fictional style. Webster's presentation through the conjurer's visions makes new use of the dumb shows narrative capabilities. The audience watches the murderer as he watches his murders.

Brachiano turns, “from a fellow audience member into the object of their attention.”

(Márkus 273) Watching Webster’s dumb shows is voyeuristic and unsettling, even (and perhaps especially) for a reading audience who is already removed from the performance.

“Revenge is a kind of wild Justice” — Francis Bacon and René Girard

The philosopher-anthropologist René Girard’s discourse on *Violence and the Sacred* provides an anthropological lens for the action depicted in these texts. Girard crafts an idea of vengeance as an act in retribution for another act — which I think many would find agreeable and accurate. There is a distinction, however, that both Bacon and Girard invoke, which re-evaluates the acts we may consider revenge: *public* vs. *private* revenge. Private revenge is perhaps what we know best — the personal action in retribution for an action against oneself. This, of course, carries with it the danger of escalation. The original victim may administer revenge that modifies or exceeds the amount of destruction of the original act. Vindice, for example, is tasked with avenging the deaths of his father and his fiancée, Gloriana. It seems as though the death of the old Duke who killed these two should satisfy Vindice’s thirst for justice (perhaps Lussurioso’s additional death would appeal to more audiences as “equal justice”) yet the scene is littered with bodies by the end of the fifth act. Vindice himself is responsible for most, but not all, of these deaths. One could make the argument that these few have also injured Vindice to some degree either within the play or before its events — but Vindice’s hubris and sense of duty solidifies these extra murders as both escalated and modified acts of vengeance for the original wrong. In the case of Hamlet, when greeted with the opportunity to dispense justice on the kneeling Claudius in Q1 scene 10, the prince realizes that the act of killing Claudio would not be enough to avenge his father unless he can secure his damnation — thus postponing the execution until it can be

escalated and leading to the ensuing deaths of many others. Private revenge may be as grandiose as Vindice or Hamlet's, but it can also take the form of smaller incidents of violence in everyday life — though we usually don't define these tense moments through the lens of revenge. *Public* revenge, on the other hand, happens every day within modern society through “fair” judicial systems. Instead of personally acting in retribution for another act, good citizens bring their dispute to a third party judge or jury that will administer the “correct” amount of retribution to keep the situation from escalating. This also has its flaws, however, as the “correct” amount of retribution can and will be influenced or challenged by contemporary cultural views. In the case of revenge tragedies, the arbiters of justice are usually either corrupt or the source of the avenger's misery. The most well known scene of *The White Devil* is also the only one that bears a name: “The Arraignment of Vittoria” (E2). This “arraignment” comes after Vittoria is apprehended in the final few moments of the second dumb show, and this spectacle of court drama emphasizes the problematic nature of public revenge (especially, for Vittoria, in a patriarchal society). Cardinal Monticelso harasses Vittoria with no regard for legal proceeding and sentences her to a house for “penitent whores” under no one's authority but his own. This imbalance of justice is what pushes Hamlet, Vindice, and Flamineo all to go outside of the law for their retribution.

Revenge *is*, then, in Francis Bacon's words, “a kind of wild justice” — for what is the difference between public and private revenge other than the social acceptance of the former as integral to a “civilized” society? And even then, private revenge still maintains some of the formal characteristics of public revenge through its ritualistic and almost religious nature, as Girard posits. Just as Dr. Julio's meticulous poisoning ritual echoed the rites of religious worship, many of the acts of violence in these stage directions have that

“mechanical” quality that Márkus prescribes to the masques of the *Revenger’s Tragedy*. When Brachiano seems “*neare his end*” his disguised murderers, “*present him in his / bed, with a cru- / cifex and hallowed / candle*” though instead of performing final rights they strangle him (K2). Though Hamlet and Leartes “catching” each other’s rapiers could take many forms onstage, the simple direction has symmetry to it on the page that both creates a pleasing stage image in the reader’s minds and ensures that all of the fatalities of this scene are caused by the same (mechanical) poison, which brings on death for everyone.

The only way to stifle and possibly stop the cycle of vengeance is through sacrifice. Girard proposes that sacrifice has always acted as a way to *prevent* the original act of violence. Aptly, Girard uses the example of kings and their fools to illustrate this effect. The king, he argues, is often alienated from society because of his status. This foreignness within one’s own community makes him a ripe target for sacrifice, as both history and these playwrights have shown again and again through their representations of monarchs falling from grace. Girard states: ‘The king has a sort of foil, however, in the person of his fool. The fool shares his master’s status as an outsider [...] From every point of view the fool is eminently ‘sacrificeable,’ and the king can use him to vent his own anger. But it sometimes happens that the king himself is sacrificed, and [...] in a thoroughly ritualistic manner’ (12). Three dukes — Lussurioso and the old duke (*Revengers Tragedy*) and Brachiano (*White Devil*) — who occupy a seat akin to Girard’s king each succumb to this “thoroughly ritualistic” death which acts as a sacrifice to end the violence onstage.

In the old duke and Brachiano’s case, though the sacrifice of their lives should indicate an end to the cycle of revenge, they are not the final acts of violence in the play. After having tortured the old duke — first with having him kiss the poisoned skull of

Gloriana, then making him watch the duchess and his bastard have a romantic encounter — Vindice and Hippolito *finally* kill him. There is no stage direction for his death, but the old duke's final words are cut off by Vindice's line ("Thy brook is turned to blood") suggesting (especially to a reader) that instead of letting the poison kill him Vindice has simply executed the duke himself. Yet, although this avenges the death of Gloriana and his father, Vindice's hubris and hatred for the corrupt court leads him to seek out Lussurioso's death as well in the highly ritualized aforementioned masques. For *The White Devil*, though Brachiano's death satisfies the deaths of Isabella and Camillo, the play still has Flamineo's crimes to answer for — which it promptly does. Flamineo's death is somewhat as mechanical as the others, but with less obvious instances of ritual perhaps reflecting his social status within the world of the play. His suicide pact with his sister, Vittoria, and Zanche, her servant, is foiled when the two turn their pistols on him and: "*They shoot and run to him and tread upon him*" (L4). While the simultaneity of the shooting is ritualistic to a degree, it is somewhat undermined by Webster's very specific direction for the women to trample him. In a way, this is the world of the play trying to rid itself of the violent force of Flamineo, and although he "riseth" and reveals that the guns weren't loaded, all three are soon apprehended by Lodovico and the same group that has expunged the world of Brachiano. Again, though there are no specific stage directions for their execution, within the dialogue Lodovico instructs the other two men (each has a victim) to, "strike, / With a [j]oint motion" (M1^V). Three simultaneous deaths exceeds Flamineo's suicide pact and puts an emphasis on what our revengers (in this case, Lodovico and co.) feel is *necessary* for the sacrifice. Yet, like Hamlet and Vindice, the revenger cannot be allowed to live in the newly purged world he has created through sacrifice. Bacon writes that, "vindictive persons live

the life of witches; who, as they are mischievous, so end they infortunate.” The revenger has no place in a world without revenge — and as such, Webster promptly has Lodovico, Gasparo, and Carlo executed by the young prince Giovanni who, like “Fortenbrasse” of *Hamlet* Q1 and Antonio in *Revenger’s Tragedy*, clean the slate of the world of the play — ending the cycle of revenge.

Hamlet seems to get the short end of the stick here, for although Hamlet orders the King to drink the same poison that “Gertred” dies from, there is nothing particularly satisfying in the way of ritual or likening it to sacrifice. This is not, however, to say that *Hamlet* is devoid of the ritual nature of the other plays, though, as the complexities behind the dumb show indicates. If anything, Hamlet’s confirmation of Claudius’ crime and ensuing attempted murder come closer to the simplistic ritual associated with sacrifice in many cultures. His kneeling and reverent stance unknowingly connect him to the ritual of religion — the sacrifice on the altar — and further gives justification to Hamlet’s hesitation in the face of his uncle’s piety. Bacon argues, however, that “the delight [of revenge] seemeth to be not so much in doing the hurt as in making the party repent.” Claudius’ prayer, though inconvenient to Hamlet, provides this repentance, and may cause the young revenger to re-evaluate what he actually wants — revenge or justice?

Perhaps the meta-ritual arching over all three of these revenge tragedies is contained in each of their most directed actions — the dumb shows. Each serves its turn in either perpetuating part of the revenge cycle or ending it — as in the *Revenger’s Tragedy* masques. They vary in degree of specification, from Webster’s highly detailed descriptions in his own publishing to the more direct, but less detailed reconstructed dumb show in the bad quarto of *Hamlet*; yet each acts as a specific set of directions for anyone wishing to portray these

vignettes. The problem that has constantly faced those wishing to adapt theater to another medium — be it film, radio, or in our case, text — is that there is no way to recreate the spontaneity of the stage. One night, the actor playing Dr. Julio might forget to “[*burn*] *perfumes*” or perhaps the musicians miss their cue and there is no “*sounding Musick*” for Lussurioso’s coronation or the masque of the revengers — separating the play as presented from the play as conceived. Or, maybe they simply lacked the means to perform a dumb show to the full capacity of the text (ex. instead of a “vaulting horse” the players at the Red Bull Theater had to make due with a table). Regardless of the “what ifs” — the preservation of dumb shows in these texts — regardless of who authored them — reaffirms the ritualistic nature of the revenge tragedy genre. Each of these death-related mini-plays goes above and beyond simply indicating who kills who but employ a literary rhetoric that cannot be argued with on the page.

It would be rash to claim that three plays (however representative they are) are indicative of a whole genre, but the underlying tension in these revenge tragedies — illustrated through the detailed stage direction — harmonizes with Girard’s observations when viewed on the page. I stipulate “on the page” again to emphasize the difference between what has been discussed in this paper and the practices of early modern drama. As the bad quarto proves, plays tended to undergo many changes before they premiered on the stage and it would be foolish to try and reconstruct what these satirical and dark pieces would have looked like or how they would be received by a theater-audience. Perhaps only a fraction of what we can now identify as satire aimed at Elizabeth and James’ courts actually survived to the stage. But, to the early modern reader, these works as printed were no longer restrained by the human error in their representation. Though the “authority” of directions

varies — from Jonson and Webster’s control of their printing to Shakespeare and Middleton’s hands-off approach — some process of translating stage action into stage direction occurred to create these texts. Earlier printings tend to be simpler in their presentation of directions — obscuring the action and relying on reader inference from the dialogue. But as time went on, not only did stage directions standardize, but they also became more complex and literary. In the case at hand, this has preserved these ritualistic stage actions of murders and acts of violence and revealed an undercurrent of sacrificial representation in early modern drama.

If Girard is correct and sacrifice is the only means of stopping the cycle of revenge, then these works are attempting to achieve the catharsis that accompanies justice by representing the plight of vengeance and taking on authority again and again — complicating themes and growing more and more ritualistic and gruesome, with higher and higher body counts. Every revenge tragedy ends with a note of redemption for the world of the play — Giovanni, Antonio, and Fortenbrasse in this case each have a clean slate to create a society where private revenge against authority is not a necessary substitute for public revenge (i.e. justice). Getting to that moment of redemption, however, requires sacrifice.

The Author’s Revenge

Once, a few years back, an artist friend was having some trouble with staging a work by Samuel Beckett. They remarked to me: “If he was going to be so anal about his directions, why didn’t he just write a novel?” The Irish dramatist’s works are famous for their incredibly detailed fictional stage directions. Samuel Beckett’s estate, which owns the rights to his works, is also quite famous for its “iron grip” over the plays presentations.

Besides not allowing gender-bent productions and adaptations of the playwright's work, they have also been known to stop tours of shows for deviating from the play's meticulous stage directions. One of the most famous of these cases was when Fiona Shaw starred in Beckett's short drama *Footfalls* in 1994 at the Garrick Theatre in London. Directed by Deborah Warner, the production caused a stir when the members of the estate saw a performance in which several lines were altered and Ms. Shaw deviated from the directions to move at several moments. Edward Beckett, the playwright's nephew and executor, decried that, "[t]he hypnotic effect of the words was shattered by the perambulation. And for what purpose?" (Gussow, "Modify Beckett? Enter, Outrage"). The younger Beckett compared his uncle's work to pieces of music to justify his outrage: "Every piece of Mozart can be played differently, but everyone has to play the same notes."¹⁶

It seems the late Mr. Beckett's estate has the same protective instinct that Jonson and Webster would have exhibited when it came to presentations of their narratives. Only, we have come a long way insofar as recognizing drama as art, and Beckett's estate has a firmer legal president for "preserving" his works. All Webster and Jonson could do to preserve their narratives was to ensure an accurate printing. And in many ways, this has ultimately helped these texts become staples in the field of early modern drama. Their printings are more "authorial" — their stage directions and other paratext becoming almost more dialectical in their presentation. In opposition, seeing the drastic differences of scene order and composition between the bad quarto of *Hamlet* and its successors proves that "inaccurate" texts — those heavily filtered by the collaborative playhouse — can deviate substantially from what we regard more "authorial" texts (Q2/F). Middleton's *Revenger's*

¹⁶ The estate has stopped several other high-profile productions since 1994 various versions of *Waiting for Godot* with all-female casts.

Tragedy, with its early compositional clues, reveals a text somewhere in the middle — from the author’s mind, but not revised for the reader’s eye. While these texts are interesting nonetheless, they lack complexity in stage action and often rely on inference. This, in one way, makes them more rich and ripe for interpretation. But, on the other hand, Webster and Jonson’s guiding narrative voices reveal to us a process of revision for the page that was just coming into being — at the expense of reflecting the author’s narrative instead of what the play actually would have looked like on the early modern stage.

The intricate stage directions of Webster, Jonson, and Beckett, then, are a kind of *authorial revenge* on the adaptability and collaborative nature of the theater. To engage their work with the literary greats they prescribe a very clear narrative of both dialogue and stage action. Luckily, because they exist in the public domain, our performers still have an easier time producing and adapting these works than those with the lawyers of the Beckett estate breathing down their necks. Still, to stage a production of *The White Devil* as Maria Aberg recently did at the Royal Shakespeare Company (2014), where instead of Brachiano and others having a “*fight at barriers*” they engaged in a Luchadore-style wrestling match. Is this not going against Webster’s precise narrative, reshaping the work? Perhaps they *are* more fit for the page they were revised for — written with only a reading audience in mind, not to record a performance and not to give instructions for further performances. They are the works of their own author, or in Jonson’s case, all *Workes* and no “plays.”¹⁷ And, as it happens, re-adapting them for the stage *is* challenging as they do not take into account the limits of the theater. So, in retribution for their earlier, poorer printings made without their consent, Webster and Jonson assert a voice of overwhelming narrative dominance in their paratext. In the same way a sacrifice requires a ritual to ensure the revenge tragedy world

¹⁷ Which makes Jonson, in this writer’s opinion, quite the dull boy.

has been purged of corruption, so Jonson and Webster sacrifice interpretation for rigid stage direction.

And yet, although *Hamlet* Q1 and *Revenger's* lack this same voice of narration, we can still easily discover themes that underwrite all of their stage directions, as well as Webster's — authoritative or not. Each employs thoroughness in describing the mechanisms of the dumb shows and masques. The supernatural is often created through direction to emphasize stage action further — an acousmatic voice of the author (*A blasing star appeareth/the gost from under the stage*) which creates a trope that continues to haunt tragedies of this nature. The king/duke/prince is murdered in a highly ritualized way. In a sense, the entire play is an outline for the ritual of some type of greater sacrifice. Dramatized sacrifice doesn't hold up to the real thing, of course, but to powerless peasants and up-and-coming middle-class Londoners, it must have brought some catharsis to see a world so tinged with evil — so corrupted in the sphere of public revenge — that it *must* be taken down through private revenge to start anew. And this prescription — these mechanical dumb shows, the supernatural, and ritualized killings — for the execution of a successful revenge tragedy is a ritual in and of itself as created by the playwright on behalf of the citizen. The sacrifice of the show prevents the masses from acting in violence against the state, pre-empting the act with fictional narratives where the state is dismantled (i.e. revenge tragedies). Theater has always been ritualized, sanctified, and mystified by its practitioners — the tradition of revenge tragedies may be the cause.

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